

BRUCE LEE

THE CHILD

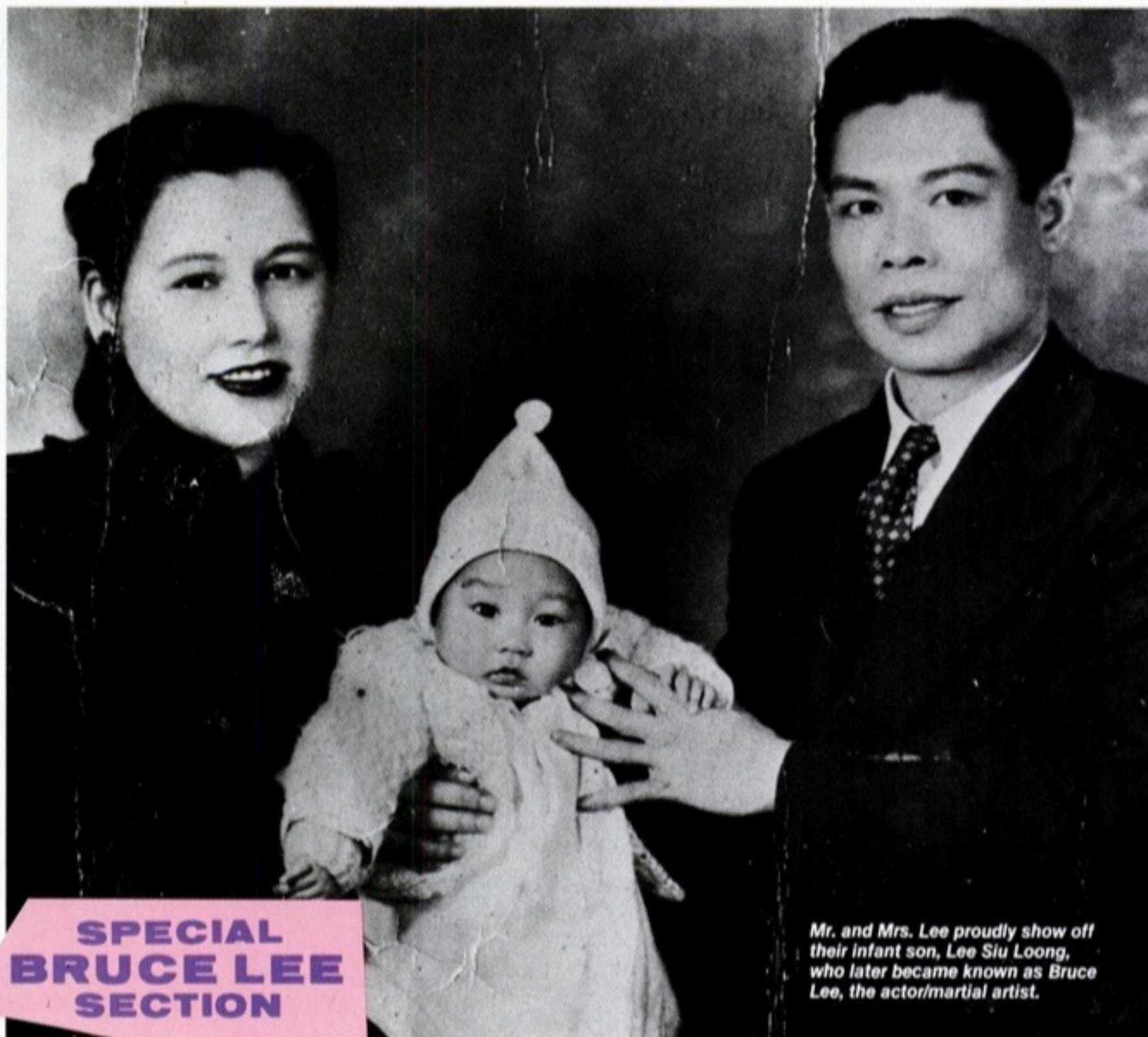
Growing Up in Hong Kong With the "Little Dragon"

by William Cheung

We've all heard about Bruce Lee the fighter, Bruce Lee the actor, Bruce Lee the instructor, Bruce Lee this, Bruce Lee that. But very little has ever been published about Bruce Lee, the child. What was Lee Siu Loong, the "Little Dragon," like while growing up? Did he run, jump and play like a normal child? Did he ever stumble and fall or, God forbid, cry like other children? What exactly were the qualities that shaped the individual who would one day become recognized as the best fighter, pound for pound, on the face of the earth?

In the following article, author William Cheung, who was Lee's close friend as the two grew up together in Hong Kong, reveals a side of Bruce never seen before in any publication. You will get a feel for Lee, the childhood film star, Lee the troublemaker, and Lee the little boy. By the article's conclusion, you will have discovered a side of Lee you never knew before. And you will have a better understanding of how and why the boy became the man he did.

—Ed.



Mr. and Mrs. Lee proudly show off their infant son, Lee Siu Loong, who later became known as Bruce Lee, the actor/martial artist.

**SPECIAL
BRUCE LEE
SECTION**

Early one November evening in 1949, I had just finished my homework when my uncle arrived at my house unexpectedly and took me to a birthday party. Not until we got to the Nathan Road address in Kowloon did I realize we were going to the child star Lee Siu Loong's (Bruce Lee) birthday party. I was very excited about having the honor to meet a child star in person. I had seen two of his movies, and they were both excellent.

The apartment was situated on the second floor of a large building. We pressed the doorbell at the bottom of the stairs, but it was at least five minutes before the housekeeper arrived to open the gate. When we climbed the first flight of stairs, we found there was another gate. After another flight of stairs, we reached the second floor. There were two more gates, one situated at the top of the stairs, and another in front of the door. I was very surprised at such immense security. Later I learned that these gates were to delay the police in case of a raid, because Bruce's father was allegedly an opium consumer. In those days, opium smoking was very popular among the Chinese people, especially the opera and movie stars, and Bruce's father was a very famous Chinese operatic comedian.

There were a lot of kids at the party, including Bruce's five cousins, two elder sisters, his elder brother and two of Bruce's best childhood friends—Raymond Cheung, son of a very famous film star, and Unicorn, also a child film star.

My uncle introduced me to Mr. and Mrs. Lee, and Bruce. Mrs. Lee asked Bruce to take care of me because we were the same age. I followed Bruce to another room where all the kids were playing. I took a good look at this child star: he was very skinny and his facial complexion was pale. He was an inch or two shorter than me, but he had very long arms; while standing up straight, his fingertips could reach his knees when he let his arms down. His walk was like a camel bucking up and down because he had very deep insteps. When he walked, only the ball of his foot touched the ground.

The food was Chinese, served up in buffet style, but not many of us were interested. We stayed in the other room and played games.

After the food, the lights were turned off. Someone brought in a birthday cake with nine candles and we sang a birthday song. Then Bruce blew out the can-



Bruce (at far right) poses with (from left to right) brother Peter, sister Agnes, mother Hoi Chuen, sister Phoebe, and brother Robert.

dies after he made his wish. Someone turned the light on, and I noticed the writing on the cake: "Happy Birthday to the Little Phoenix." I was very puzzled by the last two words "Little Phoenix." Later I was told by my uncle that 13 months before Bruce's birth, his family had lost a son, and when Bruce was born, he was a month premature and was very small

and weak. It was a traditional Chinese superstition to have a precious son's ears pierced and have him christened a female name. This would confuse the evil spirits so they would not take the son away from the family. Bruce was born in the year of the dragon, and phoenix is the female match for dragon in Chinese tradition, thus the family gave him the nickname "Little Phoenix."

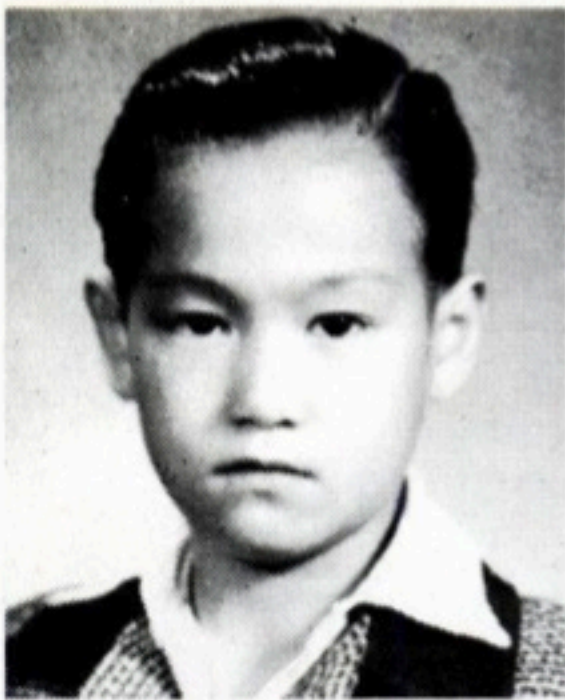
After the cake was served, Bruce came over and sat next to me. I told him I was also nine years old. He told me he was attending a primary school in Kowloon, but he did not like it very much. I asked him why, but he was reluctant to talk about it. Later I learned the reason he disliked the school was that all the other students were female—he was enrolled in a girls school!

Bruce told me he was in the process of doing a movie and would like to invite my uncle and myself to the studio to watch the filming. Later that week my uncle came to take me to visit Bruce and his father at the film studio. Mr. Lee had already finished his scene and was taking off his makeup when we arrived, but Bruce was still on the set. There was a lot of commotion on the set because Bruce, playing the part of a newspaper boy, was supposed to squat down holding a bowl of rice, but he kept falling over. This was because of his high insteps, which made it very difficult for him to squat. Eventually they had to get him a little stool to sit on. The film was about 12 families who were living in a government apartment, and the children had to go out to shine shoes and sell newspapers to help the families survive. It was a touching story and Bruce acted



Photo courtesy of William Cheung

It was his close friend, William Cheung (above), who introduced Bruce to wing chun kung fu master Yip Man, and thus got him started in the martial arts.



Above and right, two early photos of Bruce, as a grade schooler and as a teenager. According to William Cheung, Bruce was a sincere, humorous youngster.



very well in it.

For our next few meetings we went to the movies or the amusement park. Bruce's brother Peter, or my uncle, always acted as our chaperone because we were too young to be going out on our own.

Summer holidays came, and Peter, my uncle, Bruce and I went to the swimming pool at Lai Chi Kok in Kowloon. This pool was barricaded from the sea on one side with a net, and there was a restaurant built on stilts next to the pool on the other side. We had occupied a table on the balcony overlooking the pool and were admiring the divers. After lunch we changed into swimsuits. It happened to be low tide so the depth of the pool became very shallow and the water murky. We were sitting on the balcony deciding whether we should swim when I noticed that seated at the next table was a youngster named Ming whom I had met in the last school swimming competition. He was a junior diving champion. I fancied myself a pretty good diver too, but because of my commitment to other events, I never had a chance to compete in the diving. I decided to challenge Ming to a friendly diving contest.

We went down to the pool and commenced a few warm-up dives. Peter and Bruce were appointed judges. As we were about to start the contest, Ming decided the water was too shallow for safe diving. I told him he was a coward, and I assured him I would dive off the roof of

the restaurant if somebody bet me enough money. Ming said he would bet me \$10 (the equivalent of \$200 today).

Disregarding Peter and Bruce's advice, I climbed up to the roof, partly because I could not go back on my word and partly because I wanted to show them how brave I was. From the roof, some 30 feet above the water, the pool looked like a miniature snooker table. The water couldn't have been more than

four feet deep.

I took one big breath, positioned myself at the roof edge, and jumped, arching my body into a swan dive. I hit the water and found myself skidding along the bottom of the pool. As I decelerated, I swam to the edge of the pool and emerged from the water.

I looked up and saw Bruce running toward me, shouting "Are you all right? It was a beautiful dive! Are you hurt?"

I acknowledged that I hadn't broken any bones, but as we walked toward Ming, I discovered that blood was streaming down my face and all over my body. I had apparently skidded along the bottom of the pool and the rough surface had taken off most of the skin from my face, arms, body and legs.

Everyone seemed to find the incident most amusing, except for Bruce. He was really concerned, and he told me that even though he could not swim, he had been prepared to dive in the water to rescue me when I did not surface immediately.

This was the beginning of our friendship. We were to grow even closer over the next few years.

At first—I suppose through my ignorance, because I considered Bruce a celebrity—it was my impression that a star would take care of his face and would not like to get into any fights. So I was hiding my *wing chun* kung fu activities from Bruce until he found out through someone else. I was sort of looking out for him like he was my little brother. I'd say "Look, just lay back. I will take care of it."

Then in the middle of 1954, when we were 14, he begged me to take him to my kung fu class. But before he could do that, he had to get his parents' approval. So we went to see his parents at least three times before they gave their OK.

Continued



As a preteen, Bruce had bit parts in several Cantonese films (right and above right). His first starring role came in the 1958 film *The Orphan* (far right).

Bruce was hyperactive; he had so much energy. He was like a magnet—trouble just attached to him. He was in three schools in three years. He was very stubborn. He did not submit to pressure or intimidation.

After my instructor, Yip Man, accepted him, he seemed to find a new love. Any time he came to class he would stay until they turned off the lights. They had to kick him out. He would come over after school at about 4:00 p.m. and stay until about 10:00 or 10:30. Hong Kong is a very humid and hot place; you could only do so much and then you would be dehydrated and exhausted. Bruce felt that if he could get his outer clothing all sweaty, then he had a good training session.

Bruce was such a dedicated martial artist. Within a year, he overtook a lot of his seniors. And it surprised a lot of them because they thought "Here is a sissy movie star." But he advanced so fast, and he had no fear of being hurt or having pain.

Bruce was sincere. He cared a lot about his friends and was always will-



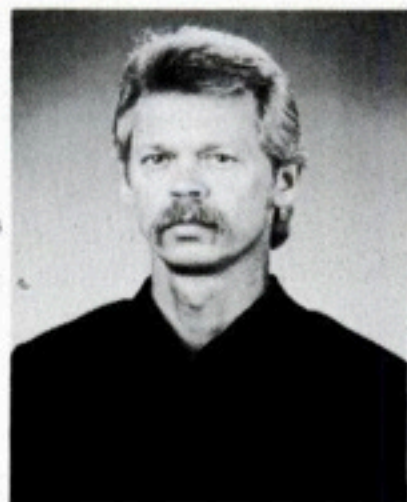
Bruce got his start in the martial arts under the tutelage of wing chun kung fu great Yip Man, pictured above performing "sticking hands" training with Lee.

ing to help out. He liked to make his friends laugh; he was humorous.

He's the only person I know who would train 24 hours a day in kung fu. Even if he was talking to you, he would be doing techniques. In Hong Kong, during the summer holidays in 1958, he'd come down to visit me, and in the middle of the night he'd wake me up and say "I thought of this counter for this attack." It was like four in the morning. I'd say "Have you gone to bed yet?" He'd say "No." That's what made him so much better. He was a perfectionist. He would not move onto another technique until he perfected the first one. We would train on and on for one technique, and I'd say "I'm sick of this. I'm going to get some tea." Two hours later he would still be doing the same technique.

He also had foresight. He was making predictions that he was going to make kung fu a household name, and that he was going to make a good living from it. In those days there were very few people taking kung fu seriously.

I think Bruce respected me a lot, and I loved him a lot. We got along well. ✕



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